



THE TWISTED TALES OF LUNA CARMOON

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*We talk to one of the most exciting British filmmakers on the scene about her festival hit *Hoard*, the state of British cinema and her obsession with the macabre.*

LUNA CARMOON

Sitting opposite Luna Carmoon, you'd never know that she that she was fresh off the heels of a triumphant festival run. Her debut feature *Hoard* received a thunderous standing ovation at the 2023 Venice Film Festival, and the filmmaker is in deep prep for the film's planned spring release. But Luna seems the least bit worn by the fresh attention. Bright-eyed and honest, she's the type of presence that makes you feel at total ease after a few words exchanged. She speaks with a candidness that is almost childlike in its wisdom—a true oddity in the best way.

"I feel lucky that when I grew up I never lost that unique way that children perceive things," she says. "Even today, I feel like I'm playing adult. But I knew that as a kid already. I always felt like I had a one-up on the adults and teachers. I knew they were kids that had just aged. The inside stays the same. You're still scared. We're always coming of age."

For Luna, *Hoard* started off as a suicide note, a final fuck you to the world before kicking the bucket. "I thought, I don't want to be here any more, so I'm going to write this thing that encompasses all of my essence, and then leave it at the bottom of the bed and be done with my life." Thankfully, the film instead became a lifeline, and though the final product isn't entirely autobiographical, it's personal to Luna in more than a few ways. "Writing *Hoard* was about immortalising the women who raised me. There was a primitive bond between me and my nan—it was such that in silence we could communicate. She was my twin flame."

Set in the 1980s and 1990s, *Hoard* concerns Maria (Saura Lightfoot Leon), a 16-year-old girl living happily in a foster home in Downham, South London, whose Summer is upended when a box of her biological mother's ashes arrives at the door. She also meets the much older Michael (Joseph Quinn), an ex-foster child who takes a liking (more like an obsession) to her. Together they engage in a destructive affair that turns their estate into an acid-soaked nightmare, and forces Maria to confront long-buried traumas. It's one of the most exciting indie British films in recent years—read on for a deep dive with the filmmaker who brought it to life.





A RABBIT'S FOOT

I always find it fascinating when a filmmaker recreates their childhood so vividly on screen like you do here. What kind of emotions did that bring out of you?

LUNA CARMOON

It was surreal for my mum when she came to the set—she had this guttural emotional reaction to seeing it. Me and my mum and my sister all sat on the sofa and started crying. The production team were behind us like: “Umm, what’s happening?” But it was really beautiful. It can take so long to get a project off the ground that I only want to do things if they’re personal. I’m a pretty lazy person, so unless I’m absolutely enthralled by something then I’ll just oscillate between disinterest and obsession. It has to be all of me, bleeding into it. And this story was never meant to be seen. I wrote it as a 20-page story in 2020.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

Tell me more about how the first seeds of this story were planted.

LUNA CARMOON

It was an exorcism of myself. I felt like a vessel, it streamed out of me and I have no memory of writing it. It was going to be something that I would just write and then kick the bucket. I thought: “I don’t want to be here any more, so I’m going to write this thing that encompasses all of my essence, and then leave it at the bottom of the bed and be done with my life.”

There was also this venom at the birth of it. I got ghosted on my planned first feature. I didn’t hear from the people I was working with, even after I finished my short and it got into festivals. So when I wrote the first unofficial version of *Hoard*, all of this anger came out of me. I wrote it in the space of two weeks. I was going to leave it wrapped in ribbon at the end of my bed and I thought of how people would stumble upon it and say: “This disgusting gal...she was so sweet, how could she write such filth?”

A RABBIT'S FOOT

That’s a very human fantasy that most wouldn’t admit.

LUNA CARMOON

Did you hear about that school caretaker in Michigan who spent his whole life secretly painting this set of tapestries, and they only found it after he died? It was all of this beautiful, strange imagery; this wonderful world he was putting his whole artistic self into. That’s what writing *Hoard* did for me. I was working in a garden centre at the time of writing, and these characters were like my sanctum. I looked forward to visiting them in my head and having them speak to me. I would write down fragments of their dialogue on receipts at work.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

I see a lot of that in Maria as a character too.

LUNA CARMOON

I lost my sense of smell because of Covid and I’ve only recently gotten fragments of it back, and smell is such an important part of the story, and it’s an important part of what triggers memory for us. In its place, I started to taste the essences of time. When I was writing *Hoard* I got this weird metallic taste in my mouth, and it reminded me of this fireplace we used to have. Around the panelling of the fireplace were these three teacups and I was terrified of them because they had this mysterious, blue chalk-like substance inside them. It made me feel disgusted when I opened them and saw that. It reminded me of bugs festering inside someone’s stomach. It felt filthy and strange to me, but I was also in awe of it, I would open it every day. And I tasted the essence of it in my mouth while writing the film.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

The hardest thing to communicate through a movie is taste and smell.

LUNA CARMOON

How can I create a new process of relating memory [without flashbacks]? The senses were the gateway to that. I spoke to a friend who has epilepsy, and before an epileptic fit he’ll go into a daze. He described that to me as an overwhelming feeling of *deja-vu*. There are things in *Hoard* that are heard in the first half that haven’t happened until the second half, whether it be sound design or lines of dialogue humming



in the background. There’s dialogue that Laraib has said to Maria in the future that you hear in the past, so when you come to hear them in the film’s present, the hope is that subconsciously you experience that disorienting feeling associated with *deja-vu*.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

It’s rare to see a film about grief that is so colourful. Why did you decide to pair this vibrancy with such heavy themes?

LUNA CARMOON

I just fucking hate the past decade of British cinema. I love Andrea Arnold, don’t get me wrong, I think her art is beautiful. But what came from her is a string of filmmakers not from these worlds. It got to a point where you’re either making poverty porn or making horror in this country and that’s your stepping stone into the film industry. A lot of my favourite British films are from the 60s and 70s and there’s such a vibrancy in the working-class world. It’s so easy

for executives to dilute you—when I did my short I was told, “It doesn’t quite look like *Fish Tank*,” and I said, “Well, not all estates look the same. This is the estate I live on, and it is full of vibrancy and colour.” I didn’t want to pigeonhole what that meant, because “working class” means so many different things to so many different people.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

Do you see your film as a course correction in that way?

LUNA CARMOON

I think so. When I think about my memories with my nan, her house was alive with character. So who are these poverty porn films made for? I’m not quite sure. The Cannes groups, maybe.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

Maybe people who have never lived in poverty...

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We've all envisioned ourselves doing taboo
things. We miss it. People want to see
things undiluted, because that's how
we exist with one another."*

LUNA CARMOON

Exactly! That's escapism for them. But escapism for actual people who are in a survival mode of life is going to see action and fantasy and horror, they don't want to be reminded of the grimmest moments of their life. And that's not what it's like to live in 'ends'. It's always full of life. It feels electric. I wanted the first half of the film to feel saturated in colour, just like how it feels to be a child experiencing the world. The colours disappear as Maria leaves childhood and becomes a teenager, then as soon as she begins to enter delirium all of those colours start to creep back into focus.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

How else were you influenced by classic cinema?

LUNA CARMOON

When we were casting, I didn't want people who had laser treatments. I want to see texture. I want to see acne and pitholes and scars. I want to see people with character. You can see that texture on an Oliver Reed or Alan Bates. I missed seeing that. So we used two different lenses: one for what we called the theatre of the absurd moments and another for the Alan Clarke world. The absurd world uses these kowa Japanese lenses from the 70s, and in the grounded world we used the same lenses from Todd Haynes' *Carol*. It's

how we made the absurd world feel slightly off compared to the grounded world.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

Why set the film in the 1980s and 90s?

LUNA CARMOON

The phantasm of the film could never have worked in the present day. Back then you'd finish school and sit and do handstands in your room. The character in this story is losing all the women in her life in one moment and is left with the seemingly infinite six-weeks summer holiday between school years. The past comes out to play when you can't rely on routine, and that happened to a lot of us during lockdown. It's no coincidence that the story came to me while we were all in this collective limbo during the pandemic.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

Were you ever tempted to reign your vision in because of that common perception now that modern audiences can't handle abstraction?

LUNA CARMOON

A lot of art now is being diluted for what we think is appropriate and what we think the world ought to be. But it's more damaging to have characters who aren't racist, aren't homophobic, aren't

HOARD

MEMORY IS THE
MOTHER OF ALL
MUSES, MOTHER IS
THE MUSE OF ALL
MEMORIES

Blackness, blurring flickers: Metal jaws clanking on concrete, rattling, bumping skidding an thumping, invisible in motion just splinters of silver spinning, fabric. AROUND, AROUND, AROUND.



From clockwise: Excerpt from an original draft of *Hoard* (2023).

Saura-Lightfoot-Leon on set, in *Mother's Bedroom*.

Joseph Quinn and Saura Lightfoot-Leon on set in the Downham house.

Saura Lightfoot-Leon and Deba Hekmat on set, in the Downham Tavern, where Luna's mother and grandmother also previously worked. All courtesy of Luna Carmoon.

doing terrible things, because that's not the world we live in. If you're not seeing these people, then you can't have conversation and debate and then you can't have change. Films were way more progressive in the 90s and 2000s than now, because now we're getting these films that come from a lot of older people who work in film not understanding the world of young people. And they were terrified of *Hoard*. I was ready for people to go in on the age gap between my two central characters. I don't condone any of it. But these people exist. I had so many friends who were 15 and seeing 27-year-olds. I'm not going to wipe their stories out of existence. I'm repulsed by Michael. And it's weird seeing people reacting to him with fondness. I think he's a nonce. But I'll never tell people how they should feel, or what is wrong and right. Joseph [Quinn] brought a humanity to that character that I completely lacked myself.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

Now that these characters are out into the world, do you feel finished with them?

LUNA CARMOON

I'd love to be like a Fassbinder and circle characters in and out. I wanna do my Downham Trilogy.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

What are you thinking when you see crowds' visceral reactions to some of the scenes in the film?

LUNA CARMOON

It was extraordinary. I love early Ian McEwan, and films like *The Cement Garden* with Charlotte Gainsbourg. I don't want to say you'll never see a film like that made again. But it's hard to get them off the ground without someone saying it's too taboo. So I thought, how far can I push this? The truth is, we all want to see the ugly. We all want to see humanity. We've all envisioned ourselves doing taboo things. We miss it. People want to see things undiluted, because that's how we exist with one another. That being said, there are parts in the film that even make me feel physically sick, like the spitting scene.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

Let's talk about the spitting scene.

LUNA CARMOON

That was funny, because the film shoot was part of a Covid set, so we were supposed to cut before they licked the spit but they just did it anyway. It was real spit but I made someone run to the corner shop and get a *Calippo* so they would bite it and the sugar would melt in their mouths and produce all this saliva—that's how it ended up showing so well on camera. No one has that much spit naturally.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

I read somewhere that you made a special concoction of sperm, milk, sweat and blood which you would spray on the set and the actors during filming. Whose blood and whose sperm is that?

LUNA CARMOON

My press lady, Hannah, texted me the other day saying: "Never in my ten years doing this have I ever had to have the type of conversations I've had with you." That article, and you can blame Joe for that, saying I was spraying sperm over everyone on set, created such a ruckus at the *BBC*. I was getting phone calls, text messages. Let me read one from my producer: Luna—just a heads up, the *BBC* are going to ask *TimeOut* to further clarify in their article that it was NOT in fact perfume made out of actual sperm.

And it wasn't! It was a company in Paris that creates perfumes that have backstories. I've ordered a scent for every film I've done. One of them is called *The Fat Electrician* and the story is that there was a man who was once a beautiful electrician who is now fat and is single and drinks all day, and it smells like...well, a fat electrician. There's one called *The Violet Lady* who eats parma violets and smokes all day. Rosy De Palma has her own scent, and there's a *Ghost In The Shell* scent. But this one is their most infamous. No one ever buys it, and it's called *Secretions Magnifique* and it's meant to emulate the smell of sperm, blood, sweat, tears—all sorts—and no one apart from me and Bobby, our production designer, knew that we had it on set. I sprayed the entire *Hoard* house with it and some people



Luna Carmoon. London, 2023. By Fatima Khan.

would be like, "Oh, god, something smells really good in here," and they'd be pumped, and other people would be throwing up in their mouths like, "It's that smell again." Then there was no scent until the point in the movie where Mother returns, at which point I would start to spray again, and the cast and crew would become increasingly discombobulated. They only found out not too long ago. I actually sprayed it in NFT1 at the BFI when we did our first screening.

A RABBIT'S FOOT

Would you say you have an obsession with the macabre?

LUNA CARMOON

Even when I was little I was always in touch with my shadow. I never enjoyed cartoons as a kid, I would always be searching for the darker things. I've had a lot of dark things happen in my life,

and they're some of the funniest moments. I've seen big court cases, people dying in horrific ways, skeletons coming out the closet—at the end of the day you've gone through this pure adrenaline of tearing yourself apart and it ends with laughter. Pain and laughter are neighbours. I've always been hysterically happy or hysterically sad. When you know that about yourself and invite it in just for you, then it's okay. I want to continue making things that are a little bit off, expired, unsettling. I like tapping into the darkest recesses of human nature. We all have it—and we all crave to see it.

END

